

Once again, best in Colorado

UCH Rises Again in U.S. News “Best Hospital” Rankings

By Tyler Smith

In what has become an annual summer ritual, University of Colorado Hospital once again emerged as the state’s top hospital in the “Best Hospitals” report from *U.S. News and World Report*, released July 21. It’s the fourth consecutive year UCH has earned the distinction; all four hospitals that are part of University of Colorado Health were ranked among the top 10 in the state.

The hospital also climbed in the report’s national rankings, placing 11 specialties among the top 50 in the United States, up from nine last year. It was the 21st consecutive year the hospital has had at least one specialty among the top 50.



Surgeon and Orthopedics Department Vice Chair Evalina Burger, MMed, points to growth in the number of faculty as a key to a large jump in the U.S. News rankings.

Cardiology and Heart Surgery (ranked 40th) and Geriatrics (43rd) were newcomers to this year’s list. In addition, the hospital’s Ear, Nose and Throat program was cited as a “high performer.”

The report ranks 16 specialty programs in some 4,700 U.S. hospitals. For 12 of the 16, rankings are determined by an [analysis](#) of hospitals’ performance in four areas: structure, process, outcomes, and patient safety (*see box*). For the remaining four (ophthalmology, psychiatry, rehabilitation, and rheumatology), the rankings are based on reputation, as determined by a physician survey.

In a press release, UCHealth President and CEO Liz Concordia said the rankings reflect UCH’s rising reputation beyond the borders of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region.

“This national recognition reflects the constant dedication and renowned expertise of our physicians, nurses and staff,” Concordia said “University of Colorado Hospital has become a national leader, which is why patients travel here from across the nation and even overseas for our advanced care.”

Tom Gronow, UCH’s chief operating officer, said the hospital’s continued improvement in the rankings – just five specialties made the top 50 in 2013 – is the result of collaboration between the hospital, the CU School of Medicine, and University Physicians, Inc.

“I’m extremely proud of the progress we’ve made,” Gronow said. “The reason for it is that our front-line staff and faculty put patients at the center of what we do and focus on outcomes and processes to move us forward.”

The next step for UCH, Gronow said, is to join the *U.S. News* “Honor Roll” – hospitals that had at least six specialties ranked among the top 20 or higher nationally. This year, UCH had three in the top 20: Pulmonology (2nd), Nephrology (12th), and Cancer (15th). Taking the next step, Gronow said, will require that the hospital continues to focus on improving patient access and streamlining operations.

Continued

Big steps forward. Among the notable results of this year’s report were the significant rankings improvements for Orthopedics, which climbed from 45th last year to 25th; and Neurology/Neurosurgery, which improved from 40th to 26th.

Noting that she had not yet been able to review the underlying data that determined the rankings, [Evalina Burger](#), MMed, a surgeon and vice chair of the CU School of Medicine’s Orthopedics Department, cited several factors she believes contributed to the Orthopedic program’s improved position. The program added 14 faculty in the past 12 months, Burger said, including midlevel providers and researchers. Those additions helped to drive a 20 percent growth in patient volume – one of the measures used by *U.S. News* in its rankings.

Burger also pointed to the breadth of the program, which includes subspecialists in trauma, arthroplasty, hip preservation, cartilage regeneration, and more, as a key factor in its growth.

“We’ve been able to spread the program to every aspect of orthopedic care,” she said. That, in turn, has helped the program increase the number of residents from four to six and broaden its commitment to research and scholarly work, Burger added.

The rise in rankings is the product of ongoing collaboration between the School of Medicine and the hospital, said Burger, who credited Gronow and Michael Torpey, PT, MBA, the hospital’s director of orthopedics, for committing the financial, operational, and staffing support the program needed to grow.

For his part, Torpey said both the hospital and the Orthopedics Department contributed to the ranking improvement.

“We’ve made a large jump because of the fact that there are collaborative efforts to improve the quality of care and commit the resources to making the organization a great place to work for both staff and faculty,” he said. “There has been improved alignment between the School of Medicine and the hospital in resolving issues and achieving goals – and we’re just getting started.”

Meanwhile, the Neurology/Neurosurgery program continued a steady rise in the rankings. In 2012, the program reached number 50 after being unranked the year before. It rose to 46 in 2013 and to 40 in 2014 before this year’s double-digit rankings jump.

Neurology Department Chair [Ken Tyler](#), MD, also said he needs time to study the data behind the rankings. But he too pointed to the addition of faculty as a vital factor in broadening the services, expertise, and training opportunities the Neurology program offers.



The Neurology and Neurosurgery programs continued to climb in the rankings, in part because of the growing visibility of the research and clinical work by a growing number of faculty, says Neurology Chair Ken Tyler, MD.

“We are clearly a national player with substantial NIH [National Institutes of Health] funding and many faculty in key leadership roles in our major journals and societies,” Tyler wrote in an email. “All of this adds greatly to visibility and can impact reputational parts of the score.” He pointed to other factors that figure in the rankings, including having the highest-level epilepsy monitoring unit and center; earning Joint Commission certification as a Comprehensive Stroke Center; and benefiting from the hospital’s status as a Magnet nursing facility. All of these, Tyler said, “greatly enhance” the quality of care for neurology patients.

“I don’t think this is a fluke as we have gone up steadily every year in the last five,” he said. But the rankings competition is fierce, Tyler added, with a swing of only a few points producing dramatic changes, up and down.

“It will be fun to see the data,” he said.

The Big 11

In 2015, 11 UCH specialties were among the top 50 nationally in the *U.S. News and World Report* list of “Best Hospitals” report:

- » Pulmonology (2nd)
- » Nephrology (12th)
- » Cancer (15th)
- » Orthopedics (25th)
- » Neurology and Neurosurgery (26th)
- » Diabetes and Endocrinology (30th)
- » Urology (30th)
- » Gynecology (31st)
- » Cardiology and Heart Surgery (40th)
- » Gastroenterology and GI Surgery (42nd)
- » Geriatrics (43rd)

Ear, Nose and Throat was listed as a “high performer.”

The Methodology

The Best Hospitals rankings are based on four factors in 12 specialty categories:

- » Outcomes (32.5 percent)
- » Structure (30 percent)
- » Process (27.5 percent)
- » Patient safety (10 percent)

According to the methodology documentation provided by *U.S. News*, “outcomes” include factors such as risk-adjusted mortality data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

“Structure” includes hospital volume, technology and other resources that define the hospital environment. The data comes primarily from the American Hospital Association.

“Process” refers to a hospital’s ability to develop a system that consistently delivers safe, high-quality care.

The “patient safety” ranking is derived from indicators included in the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality’s Patient Safety Index.